

The Eternal Principles of the Past: A Hermeneutic Approach to Confucian Philosophies of History

JACK CORP

Chinese historical thinking shuttles between the past and the present for mutual enrichment. Past experiences form a continuous five-thousand-year history from which present-day readers may engage in creative dialogues with historical figures and texts. To be human in traditional Chinese society is to be a historical creature (C. C. Huang 180). Li Dazhao, the first Marxist philosopher of history in China, reflected on this theme: “The future and the past are unlimited, so if I do not examine clearly the nature of history, to understand its tendencies, my life will be meaningless . . . interpretation of history is therefore truly a standard for measuring human life” (Dazhao 159). In this paper, I aim to reconstruct the nature of Zhu Xi’s philosophy of history through a hermeneutic reading of classical Confucianism, linking the principles of historical meaning forward by Kongzi 孔夫子 (551-429 BCE) and Mengzi 孟子 (c. 371-289)

Jack Corp, a double major in history and political science with minors in Asian studies and medieval studies, is a senior at Drury University expected to graduate with honors in May 2022. He plans on pursuing a doctoral degree in history, emphasizing the rural cultures of the Early Middle Ages and comparative studies of magic as it relates to religion. His philosophical interests include hermeneutic approaches to history, Max Horkheimer’s critical theory, and, more broadly, the ethics of Confucianism.

to the metaphysics articulated by the neo-Confucian tradition.¹ For Zhu Xi, the paramount philosopher of the Southern Song dynasty, the study of history was an essential, however subservient, component of his central philosophical concern with *Li* 理, the eternal and timeless pattern that gives moral meaning and intellectual comprehension to factual judgments about the past. For this reason, he claimed that the essential substance of historical meaning is constitutive of a personal investigation of the heavenly pattern *Li* observable through a form of historical materialism rooted in the metaphysical substance *qi* 氣.

Zhu Xi did not outline an explicit philosophy of history. As Conrad Schirokauer stresses, Zhu Xi's consciousness of history permeates his entire philosophical system—the most complex and developed of his era (193). It is from this system, informed by the *Analects* 論語 and the *Mencius*, that I extract Zhu Xi's vision of the past. A discussion of my use of hermeneutics will preface the construction of a Confucian philosophy of history through the classical tradition, interwoven with the teachings and philosophy of Zhu Xi.

I do not intend to argue that Song dynasty Confucianism and nineteenth-century German literary theory share some principle beyond form, eternal across geography and time. The purpose of this paper is not to develop a Confucian hermeneutics, but to read the Confucian philosophy of history hermeneutically. This is a novel approach to Zhu Xi's philosophy of history—a rather untouched subject. Past applications of hermeneutics focus entirely on Zhu's interpretations of the Five Classics, not his vision of history.² But Confucianism is, after all, a tradition of extended and extending interpretations marked by creative engagement with a body of canonical texts. Mengzi reconstructed Kongzi, as did Xunzi. Zhu Xi did not hesitate to interpret Kongzi, Mengzi, the Cheng brothers, or even shape neo-Confucianism out of dialogues with Taoist and Buddhist influences.

Confucianism embodies an intellectual heritage of philosophers and classics under constant theorization (Chen 105). The Great Learning encourages one to be “As though cut and filed,/As though carved and

¹ To maintain transliteral consistency, this paper uses the modern pinyin spellings of the Confucian sages, such as Kongzi (“Confucius”), Mengzi (“Mencius”), and Zhu Xi (“Chu Hsi”).

² See Dawid Rogacz, *Chinese Philosophy of History: From Ancient Confucianism to the End of the Eighteenth Century* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), 1-265; Ching-I Tu, ed., *The Hermeneutic Traditions in Chinese Culture: Classics and Interpretations* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2017), 228-286.

polished./Solemn—oh, exacting!”³ A carved and polished mind requires frequent dialogue with Confucian teachings to realize the moral truths in everyday practices. Creative and constant practice of these moral truths is, according to Zhu, like climbing a pagoda: “If you climb one story after another, you’ll personally get to know the top story, without inquiring of anyone else. If you don’t actually walk up it but just fantasize about it, you’ll be incapable of understanding even the lowest story” (Xi 7.7). And Kongzi argued: “Imagine a person who can recite the several hundred odes by heart but, when delegated a governmental task, is unable to carry it out . . . no matter how many odes he might have memorized, what good are they to him?” (Kongzi 13.5) In other words, it is only through practice that authentic understanding and scholarship of Confucianism grows clear and deeper insights come to light. To borrow the words of Hans-Georg Gadamer, in practice, “understanding means a growth in inner awareness, which as a new experience enters into the texture of our own mental experience. Understanding is an adventure” (Gadamer 335-336). It is essential to the self-identification and self-understanding of Confucianism to think of the tradition in terms of its canonical texts and commentaries (Chen 102). To learn Confucianism is to embed oneself in the interpretative tradition of the Four Books and Five Classics.⁴ In this sense, a hermeneutic approach positions the Confucian philosophy of history as both a constituent and manifestation of the historical context in which the Confucian discourse evolved. Consequently, a reconstruction of Zhu Xi’s philosophy of history requires the interspersing of the classical Confucian tradition found in the *Analects* and the *Mencius*.

An exploration of the philosophical view of history in Confucianism must begin with the *Analects*, a collection of teachings and anecdotes attributed to Kongzi and his disciples. Early Confucian philosophy of history searches for meaning by drawing moral lessons from the past; in short, history is an ethics guidebook. Kongzi’s interest in historical knowledge arises from its pedagogical and didactic uses. To be a teacher, the Master (i.e., Kongzi) argues, means looking to the past as a source of examples for the present (2.11). It is for this reason Kongzi believes that he transmits ancient ways rather than innovates new moral rules, rules which define “the Way” 道 *Dao* as the universal principle of history (7.1).

³ Robert Eno, trans., *The Great Learning: An Online Teaching Translation*, IUScholarWorks, The Great Learning and The Doctrine of the Mean: A Teaching Translation, ed. Zhu Xi, June 2016, 15, <https://scholarworks.iu.edu/dspace/handle/2022/23422>.

⁴ The Four Books: *The Analects*, *Mencius*, *Doctrine of the Mean*, and *Great Learning*. The Five Classics: *The Book of Change*, *The Book of History*, *The Book of Poetry*, and *The Book of Rites*.

It is within history that the *Dao*—the ideal model and repertoire of proper social, ritual, and moral conduct—found complete realization, its meaning drawn forth from the total trajectory of historical changes: “The common people today are the same people who allowed the Three Dynasties to put the upright Way into practice (Kongzi 15.25).”⁵ This passage demonstrates a selective treatment of historical patterns that Kongzi uses to supply examples of declining moral attitudes. Kongzi not only references historical periods to rebuke the present for insufficient commitment to the *Dao*, but also wields specific historical figures as part of a need to emulate the legendary sage kings: “How great was Yao as a ruler . . . How majestic in his accomplishments, and glorious in cultural spender! Shun had five ministers and the world was well governed . . . Virtue flourished as never before after the reigns of Yao and Shun” (Kongzi 8.19-8.20). To ward his audience away from any excesses at court, Kongzi stresses that Shun, an ideal king, ruled the world with only five ministers. The *Analecets*, in this way, positions the meaning of history as the tracking of virtue—the deterioration of the *Dao*—that manifests in the moral behavior of leaders.

In addition to its connection to moral conduct, the presence of the universal principle *Dao* also extends into rituals *li* 禮.⁶ Through ritual, Kongzi develops the *Dao* as consisting of the following:

[Kongzi] said, “When the Way prevails in the world, rituals, music, punitive expeditions, and attacks against foreign powers issue from the Son of Heaven. When the Way does not prevail in the world, these things issue from the feudal lords. When they issue from the feudal lords, it is seldom more than ten generations before the lords lose control of them (Kongzi 16.2).”⁷

Kongzi forms an inextricable link between the survival of a kingdom, the flourishing of the *Dao*, and the continuance of the rituals set by the ancient sage kings. He suggests that the historical role of ritual is to transmit the *Dao* and combine with moral attitudes to form the *Dao* itself. This is possible because humanity, by observing the cultural practices of the Three Dynasties, broadens the *Dao* and thereby forms continuity across Chinese history (Kongzi 15.26). With this historical knowledge, it is possible to know what will happen in the future (Kongzi 2.23). In this way, the *Analecets* realizes the “hermeneutic circle” conceived by Martin

⁵ See also Rogacz, *Chinese Philosophy of History*, 30.

⁶ Not to be confused with the eternal principle *Li* 理.

⁷ See also Rogacz, *Chinese Philosophy of History*, 31.

Heidegger, as one must envision the *Dao* in terms of how moral attitude and rituals interact with each other, and how they feed back into the *Dao* (C. C. Huang 183). This cycle becomes a definitive characteristic of the Confucian philosophy of history as one learns the *Dao* from examples of the past, then extrapolates general moral norms to form value judgments about historical and present situations, which in turn enriches one's sense of the *Dao*.

Zhu Xi associates the purpose of history with the broadening of self-knowledge and moral cultivation, for everything the historical process mediates is mediated along with the self. Under the metaphysics of neo-Confucianism, the *Dao* became equivalent to the principle *Li* 理, which is the pattern of the universe—a sort of cosmic order or norm that defines the standards of human conduct. For Zhu Xi, *Li* is the intangible essence of the historical process, the basis of the blooming or declining *Dao* from the investigation of which facts of history come under the moral judgment of this eternal paradigm of principle. As he explains, “in reading history, you should examine the great moral principles [*Li*], the great opportunities, and the periods of great order and disorder, success and failure,” so as to see things as concrete manifestations of the cosmic-historical pattern (Xi 5.67).⁸ This philosophy of history does not separate fact from moral value; instead, it situates moral value within the realm of fact, for the purpose of history is moral education (Liu 231). In other words, Zhu Xi characterizes historical knowledge as moral knowledge derived from an epistemic pursuit of *Li* through the concept of *ko wu*, or “the apprehension of the principle in things” (Xi 1.1).

To truly apprehend something is to go beyond its surface layer by scrutinizing the reasons for its existence (Xi 4.9). The same applies to historical events. All historical affairs come into existence in accordance with the *Dao*, but only through an investigation into the *Li* of the affairs does one know the why of things (Liu 230). It is not enough to know that one ought to follow rituals; a moral agent must also know why rituals deserve proper observance. Zhu Xi's view is that the relationship between historical facts or figures and morality constitute an interconnective moral web ordered by the *Dao*. While each event in the past and present has a specific place within this web, so too does each human being. Within this place is where the *Li* of things resides. To locate an event or person in this web requires comprehensive awareness and deep reflection of the

⁸ See also Chun-Chieh Huang, “The Philosophical Argumentation by Historical Narration in Sung China: The Case of Chu His,” in *The New and the Multiple: Sung Senses of the Past*, ed. Thomas H. C. Lee (Hong Kong: The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2004), 61.

“true meaning” of the Five Classics (Xi 5.21). As Zhu Xi explains: “Practice mental attentiveness and the myriad manifestations of [Li] will be complete in you,” suggesting that the *Dao* is identical with human nature (6.38).⁹ Understanding the why behind the historical manifestations of the *Dao* makes moral agents autonomous. By probing the classical and historical texts, “we’ll find that all of [the manifestations] were complete in us from the very beginning,” and “in this way moral principle [Li] and our own minds will be in perfect accord” (Xi 4.2; 4.4.). Within the context of a philosophy of history, the purpose of penetrating the *Li* of things is to locate the events and human beings in the moral web of the *Dao*. In doing so, students of history develop the ability to put into practice the moral principle, no matter the circumstance (Xi 7.4). To know, in this sense, is to find the *Li* so as to act morally within the holistic web of the *Dao*. It follows that a person’s hermeneutic experience of the Confucian canon, of Confucianism’s universal claims on humanity and virtue, constitutes the most fundamental source of the meaning of history.

Confucianism’s second sage, Mengzi, affirms this intense sense of a hermeneutical meaning of history as it relates to the extrapolation of historical facts and the idealization of past figures. As Mengzi said:

After the influence of the true King came to an end, songs were no longer composed. When songs were no longer composed, the Spring and Autumn Annals were written. The Sheng of Chi, the T’au wu of Ch’u and the Spring and Autumn Annals of Lu are the same kind of work. The events recorded concern Duke Huan of Ch’I and Duke Wen of Chin, and the style is that of the official historian. [Kongzi] said, “I have appropriated the didactic principles therein.” (4B21)

A central preoccupation with the works of the *Mencius* and a striking feature of Mengzi’s thought is the idealization of the past, primarily the Shang and Zhou dynasties, and the ancient sage emperors Yao and Shun. For Mengzi, idealization meant that these dynasties and rulers observed the Confucian norms, rituals, and attitudes manifested in the *Dao*. Mengzi’s frequent appeals to ancient history give concrete shape to abstract moral problems. Yao, Shun, King Wen, King Wu—these ancient figures serve as embodiments of moral qualities, their character envisaged in actual situations discussed in detail and in all earnestness. This is the second central feature of the classical Confucian philosophy of history on

⁹ See also JooLee Liu, *Neo-Confucianism*, 231.

which Zhu Xi operated. Idealization was not simply a reflective practice bent on fostering a cohesive identity or tradition but a method to establish supra-temporal patterns of conduct which should be followed no matter the people nor time: “Shun was a man; I am also a man. Shun set an example for the Empire worthy of being handed down to posterity, yet here am I, just an ordinary man” (Mengzi 4B28). For Mengzi, this is the obvious purpose of historical thinking: “looking for friends in history” (5B8). Mengzi applies a practical hermeneutics to his idealization; this idea of opening up a dialogue with past figures recognizes the context of these individuals, and their worlds as the state of the *Dao*—be it flourishing or in decline—defines the qualities of an era. But it also, more importantly, emphasizes interpretation as understanding; a continuous conversation between authors of antiquity and present readers. In this way, the nature of human beings is deeply situated in history, as experiences of the past, such as the lives of legendary sage kings, represent an ideal rather than a simple historical fact or event.¹⁰

The realization of these legendary ideals depends on change, for without it there would be no history. The present must replicate the virtue of Shun and Yao not simply because it is the past but rather because these norms, attitudes, and rituals embody the virtue 仁 *ren* “benevolence.” *Ren* is the principle of historical progress. Shun, Yao, and Yu ordered the world and differentiated the Empire from its “barbarian” neighbors because of a benevolent government (Rogacz 40). After their deaths, “the way of the Sages declined, and tyrants rose one after another . . . and the [*Dao*] fell into obscurity,” thus causing the decay of ancient principles and giving way to chaos (Mengzi 3B9). For Mengzi, the presence or lack of *ren* sets the course of history, as it was, for example, by *ren* that the Three Dynasties gained the Empire, and by cruelty that they lost it (4B3). Not only does this lead to a linear approach to history as tracking the gradual decay of the *Dao* since the times of the ancients, so strongly stressed by Mengzi’s idealization, but it also leads to a cynical approach as it places the potential for historical impact at an individual level. Rulers must adopt *ren* for the *Dao* to flourish, otherwise the path of morality “does not shine forth” (Mengzi 3B9). This idea is precisely what makes Mengzi’s philosophy of history hermeneutic, because it depends on the willingness of a person, specifically a ruler, to engage in a conversation with the past to delineate the proper conduct necessary for *ren*.

¹⁰ See Mengzi, *Mencius*, 1B10, 1B11, 3A1, and 4A1 for examples.

As in the case of Mengzi, Zhu Xi inscribes the blooming and degeneration of the *Dao* in a linear trajectory of decline, as marked in an inability to apprehend the *Li* of things (7.36; 7.68). But *Li*, as the force of historical change, is impotent. The process of history relies on the material constitution of people. Instead of reusing the Mencian conception of *ren*, *Li* takes causal action through *qi*, the psychophysical matter that makes up all things. According to the idea that “principle is one but its manifestations many,” Zhu Xi suggests sages and regular people share the same moral principle, and that the differences in cultivation and action arise from the *qi* that individuates entities (Rogacz 126). To vitalize *qi*, one must study antiquity. The sages have the clearest *qi* with their attitudes and actions most closely aligned with the *Dao*. For that reason, knowledge of history and historical context must not be a mass of information but a pathway into seeing history as sages did (C.C. Huang 10). It is best, Zhu Xi explains, to read the Four Books and Five Classics because “it’s like speaking with [the sages] face to face” (1.29). To study history from the sages’ perspective first requires the reading of the Classics. This form of historical engagement with texts imbues an idealistic quality to Zhu Xi’s philosophy of history, as “People are just these people, and *Dao* is just this *Dao* . . . If we now want to break the border and the wall dividing the old times from those present, we having nothing else but to explore the way of thought of Yao and Shun” (Rogacz 122-123). To Zhu Xi, reading of the canonical texts is essential. A failure to read the Classics, or to misstep by reading the histories beforehand, is like “opening a dike with a ladleful of water to irrigate the field. You can stand there and watch [the water] dry up” (Xi 5.65). To illustrate how the sages read history in proper form, Zhu Xi details a vivid account of their scholarly behavior:

Today’s scholars have never understood the main point of learning. One should simply probe moral principle (*Li*); moral principle is the same as heavenly principle. Even if sages don’t appear, this heavenly principle exists of its own . . . It simply avails itself of the sages to explain it to people. For example, the Changes treats nothing but the one principle of yin and yang. When Fu Hsi first drew [the eight trigrams], he was simply drawing this principle. King Wen and Confucius [in their work on the Changes] were both elucidating this principle. [The judgments of] “good fortune,” “bad fortune,” “remorse,” and “humiliation” were all inferred from this principle. When Confucius spoke about it, he said: “The superior man abides in his room . . . through words and deeds the superior man moves heaven and earth.” (3.30)

Noteworthy here is the sages' ability to discern the unintelligible through probing *Li*. Scholars of Zhu Xi's day fail at this duty, and as a result, collapse the purpose of learning. Accordingly, it is important to keep intact the tradition set by Fu Hsi, King Wen, and Kongzi: the unguided mind of the contemporary scholar fails to transmit through "words and deeds" the *Dao*. The relation of historical knowledge and the *Dao* is dialectical. *Li* is like the method of uncovering the past, and *qi* is like the truth. It is a yin-yang force that mediates, completes, and enhances one another to the effect of infusing meaning to history.

The aim of this paper was to conduct a philosophical analysis of the Confucian philosophy of history, as represented by Kongzi, Mengzi, and Zhu Xi, through a hermeneutic approach. For Kongzi, history holds the fullest realization of the *Dao*—the Confucian Way that constitutes the model of social life, personal conduct, and governance. History becomes a guidebook, a collection of stories and examples by which students and scholars deduce general moral norms. Mengzi contributes to this approach, as his idealization of the past presents the sage kings of antiquity as physical incarnations of Confucian virtue, and ascribed *ren* as the causal mechanism of history. With neo-Confucianism engaging in the intellectual exchange with Buddhism and Taoism, the form of Confucian metaphysics emerged. Zhu Xi applies these metaphysics to the notion of *Dao* as the historical principle and the *qi* of idealized sages. Above all else, however, Zhu Xi's philosophy of history demands the extraction of *Li*—the cosmic norm of conduct—from the canonical Confucian texts so as to gain moral meaning. To philosophize the meaning or purpose of history is to embark on a creative engagement with the past and the present. An understanding of history, for these three Confucians, is an adventure that creates a critical dialogue with a complex tapestry of intellectual tradition so as to expand self-knowledge and moral cultivation.

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